WORKING FROM UNDERNEATH: MASOCHISM AND THE PERFORMANCE OF PAIN IN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

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The first thing that comes to most people's minds when they consider professional wrestling is its falseness, in that it is not a "real" sports competition. Wrestling contests are, of course, predetermined and partly choreographed. This fakeness is typically cited as wrestling's main weakness. However, on the contrary, the fact that wrestling is scripted is actually its greatest strength. Because winning is not the desired end, narrative and emotion play central roles. Feeling and symbolism are not imposed from the outside by announcers or the larger media to enhance spectators' investment in the action, and because, unlike real sports, they are not reactions to largely uncontrollable events, they are never glossed over as they might be in "real sports." The signs and symbols of professional wrestling are, in theory, entirely motivated, the recognized goal of the performance, and as such they can be controlled and exploited to maximum narrative effect. The participants are not engaged in a rush to victory and as a result, as Roland Barthes points out, "each moment…is intelligible" (16). Each turn and twist, each rise and fall of the narrative of the match, is performed with conscious intent. A wrestling match is not concerned with resolution because that resolution is not the source of its symbolic meaning. Instead, the performance is driven by the attempt to create perfect realizations of emotion and sensation. Anger, fear, vengeance, anticipation, triumph and pain all are purposefully foregrounded and highlighted. Especially pain. The performance of physical pain is the key component of a professional wrestling match – its main pleasure, so to speak.

The focus on the performance of physical pain makes professional wrestling unique among forms of popular entertainment, especially because of the challenge of communicating and making intelligible physical pain. Film and literature (not to mention sports) also depict and describe physical pain, but professional wrestling makes physical suffering its main storytelling component. As a fantasy form of fighting that is based almost entirely on offense, with little to no emphasis placed on actually stopping attacks, the display of suffering is practically wrestling's raison d'être. This is a particularly valuable function given what Elaine Scarry describes as bodily pain's "resistance to language," or the difficulty of making intelligible to one person (or group of people) the physical suffering of another (5). Professional wrestling, then, relies on the most difficult of storytelling tools, physical pain, to play out conflicts for its audience, and that form lends immediacy to its narratives. Problematically, however, those conflicts tend to obscure structures of power in the world outside of wrestling by over-emphasizing the power of those with little agency in the wider culture (and, by extension, minimizing their pain – physical and otherwise) while dwelling on the pain of those affiliated with the dominant social group, maximizing their pain and anxiety by making it the most visible.

Professional wrestling stories, both in over-arching storylines and in the narratives of single matches, are constructed to emphasize the pain of the protagonist, or the "babyface," with whom the audience identifies. Common wrestling wisdom dictates that the antagonist, or the "heel," must punish the babyface to create anticipation for the babyface's eventual comeback. Hence, matches are often traditionally constructed around a lengthy segment in which the heel physically batters the babyface, showcasing the babyface's suffering. Though the babyface is often triumphant in the end, his pain

and suffering are the focus. This becomes problematic, however, because the babyface (particularly the most successful, main-event babyfaces) are always aligned and invested with the values of the mainstream, and the heels are usually aligned with or representative of marginalized, non-dominant values. The narrative that is played out, then, is one in which the mainstream is assaulted and made to suffer by those who, in the larger culture, have no true power, physical or otherwise. The lack of agency that the marginalized values embodied by the heels suffer from in the culture at large is obscured by the powerlessness assumed by the mainstream as embodied by the babyface. The pain of those with all the power is made to be the only pain that we can see, the only pain that matters.

Additionally, because this powerlessness is assumed willfully, there is a masochistic element to the performance. The pain and suffering on display is pleasurable because it helps the viewer ignore or disregard contradictions and inconsistencies in the dominant ideology, contradictions and inconsistencies that are sometimes highlighted by the heel character. Roy F. Baumeister points out that one of the attractions for the masochistic subject is that physical pain facilitates awareness of the self "at a low level …and the temporal focus is on the immediate present, without clear connection to the past and future," providing "an attractive escape from aversive emotion and from awareness of undesirable features of oneself (or of one's actions)" (37). The most successful wrestling characters and stories often appeal to contemporary cultural anxieties and obsessions, playing them out in a way that reassures and comforts the audience. Physical pain draws attention away from problematic aspects of the wrestler's (and the larger culture's) identity, and focuses on his strength and resolve, and the fact

that he conquers all challenges. Wrestling's emphasis on pain helps create a fantasy world, making it easier for the viewer to close their eyes to the more troubling elements of dominant culture. In the limited existing scholarship dealing with professional wrestling, the subject of masochism has, to my knowledge, rarely been previously explicitly addressed. This thesis thus contributes to existing scholarship by initiating a discussion of masochism and its relation to narrative pleasure in professional wrestling.

Terminology

Before beginning, a brief discussion of the vocabulary of professional wrestling will be useful. Professional wrestling, like any psychically walled or occluded subculture, has its own distinctive language known only to those who live and work in that subculture and to (in recent decades) enthusiasts who follow the world and are invested in it. In this essay I will use the vocabulary of professional wrestling, both because it is simpler to use the genre's shorthand, and because the language often hints at (even betrays) the sport's masochistic underpinnings.

To begin with, the word "work." "Work" has multiple connotations in a discussion of professional wrestling. Apart from the fact that it is a job, and performers are engaged in work for which they are being paid, professional wrestling itself is a "work," meaning that it is orchestrated. Wrestlers "work" a match for the audience, and anything that is predetermined, performed or in any sense artificially constructed is a "work." The opposite of a work is a "shoot," meaning that what is being depicted is ostensibly real. In recent years the concept of the "shoot interview" has become popular, in which a wrestler sits down and answers an interviewer's questions out of character, ostensibly telling the "truth" about the inner workings of the wrestling business.

Complicating matters greatly is the prevalence of the "worked shoot;" when that something that is a work is presented as if it were a shoot, or when an "unscripted" moment occurs in the middle of what the audience knows to be a scripted show.[1] One of the primary designations for a professional wrestler, within the business, is that of a "worker." Two wrestlers will "work" a conflict, or a match, for the audience. In wrestling's territorial past, when wrestlers would move from place to place to ply their trade for different regional promoters, a competent and reliable wrestler would be referred to as a "good hand," but this designation is not as prevalent anymore because of the dearth of places to make a sustainable living. "Kayfabe" is related to "work" and refers to the illusion that professional wrestling is real and to the ongoing upkeep of that illusion. Generally, "working" refers to things in the context of the performance, while "kayfabe" refers to the maintenance of the illusion of reality once the show has ended. "Kayfabe" is not preserved with the same care that it once was, if at all.[2] Additionally, there is the practice of "working" a body part in the context of a match, meaning repeatedly attacking a body part with holds and maneuvers in order to punish and weaken it. There is also the practice of "working" a hold, or focusing on one particular hold, possibly returning to that hold repeatedly during the course of a match, to highlight the punishment it inflicts. A related concept is the idea of "teasing" a hold, or indicating that

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[1] The ways in which actual "reality" informs the reality of professional wrestling are far too nuanced and complex to delve into in this essay, but professional wrestling has always used real-life conflicts, friendships, injuries, and events to inform and augment its storylines. It is enough to say that the line between "reality" and "storyline" is not fixed and very often not easily distinguishable.

[2] "Kayfabe" is itself a complicated word with multiple connotations and unclear origins. The term most likely comes from professional wrestling's carnival roots and serves various functions, all of them related to professional wrestling's artificial reality. In the past it was used as a literal call to alert members of the community to the presence of an outsider, so that the secrets of the business could be protected. Additionally, "kayfabing" someone refers to the practice of behaving as though professional wrestling is a legitimate sport,and its reality is unscripted. Friendships, conflicts, and injuries that are scripted can be said to be "kayfabed." For example, wrestler "Macho Man" Randy Savage's valet, Miss Elizabeth, was his real-life, "shoot" wife, but in 1991, they had a worked wedding at the SummerSlam pay-per-view, making them married in a kayfabe sense as well.

a hold is about to be performed but then failing to follow through, to build anticipation for the hold later in the match. Teasing holds or moves depends on an audience's familiarity with the teased hold and its context.

Within the context of a match, there are many terms and concepts. As mentioned earlier, a typical conflict and/or match will consist of a babyface or "face" (good guy) and heel (bad guy). The exact nature of these designations have become much more fluid in the past two decades, even incorporating the category of "tweener," or babyface with heelish tendencies, but tracing those permutations and their causes is not a project of this essay. There are, additionally, different varieties of faces and heels, such as the "chickenshit heel" (a heel who retreats from the face's demand for a fair fight and will only engage in combat when he has an unfair advantage) or the "white meat" babyface (a babyface that smiles and strictly engages in fair play in his matches, expecting his opponent to do the same). Most applicable to the subject of this essay might be the "monster" heel, a heel that is physically imposing or even freakish, who dominates his opponents in a punishing fashion. Monster heels are created by a process of "feeding" them lesser babyfaces to be demolished, building them up by showcasing their dominance. After being fed enough babyfaces to get the audience to accept them as a threat, the monster heel will challenge a top babyface.

Another tool for establishing heels (or any wrestler, really) is the "squash match." A squash match refers to a contest between a wrestler that is "pushed," or highlighted by the promotion, and a "jobber," a wrestler whose job it is to make the pushed wrestler look good by "selling" (a performance designed to communicate the physical or emotional effectiveness of an action) and bumping (absorbing impacts to the body) for him.

Jobbers are named after the fact that they almost always "job" in a match. To "job" or "do the job" means that a wrestler will be the loser of the match, again evoking the idea of work. Pairing pushed wrestlers with jobbers in squashes, though it is not common practice anymore, is an effective way to establish the pushed wrestler's character, motivations and unique ring mannerisms and moves, because the match is structured to highlight only one participant, with the other wrestler acting as little more than a rag doll for the exhibition. It is an easy way of getting the wrestlers "over" with the audience, meaning that they are accepted by the fans.

Everything in wrestling is judged by how over it is with the audience, and, because audience reaction is not able to be strictly controlled, not everything gets over, or gets over in the way it was intended to. Notably, in the 1980s, in the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) (a promotion[3] that was very successful in that time period at manipulating the audience's perception and response), the character of the Honky Tonk Man, a wrestler whose character, or "gimmick" was that of an Elvis impersonator, was introduced. He was intended to be a babyface, but he was immediately rejected by the audience because of the campy nature of his character. He did not get over as a babyface, so the WWF essentially asked the fans whether they liked Honky Tonk Man or not, calling the poll a "Vote of Confidence" (WWF Superstars 11-8-86). The Honky Tonk Man was rejected and the WWF began pushing him as a heel, a role in which he became very successful (WWF Superstars 11-22-86).

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[3] Wrestling companies are traditionally called "promotions," referring to the fact that they promote live wrestling events. In some respects this is an outmoded practice, as even though the promotion of wrestling remains the engine that drives business, modern-day wrestling companies are diversified into many other areas (WWE, for example, actually produces its own modestly budgeted films) beyond live wrestling events.

The end goal of all these techniques for getting a wrestler over is to create "heat" for that wrestler and his conflicts. Heat can be generically thought of as crowd reaction, but there are different kinds of heat. The most important variety is "heel heat," or the degree to which the audience reacts negatively to a heel, the idea being that the more intensely the audience dislikes a heel the more they will want to see – and, by extension, will *pay* to see – that wrestler beaten. A wrestler that is extremely over with the crowd with will receive a great deal of heat. Squash matches, because they help familiarize the audience with important characters and their motivations, help build heat for the wrestlers. During the course of a feud, key moments that are meant to advance the storyline or add heat to the conflict are referred to as "angles." Additionally, there is heat in the context of a match, meaning a well-constructed and worked match, especially between two over wrestlers, will generate heat from the audience. There are shortcuts to gaining heat, such as the common convention of a heel insulting a crowd's local sports team to get an easy negative reaction, a phenomenon known as "cheap heat." (Conversely, a babyface might come to the ring wearing the local sports teams jersey to make the crowd embrace him.) While heat refers to a sustained audience engagement, there is also the term "pop," which refers to a short burst of crowd enthusiasm.[4] This is commonplace when wrestlers make their entrance, with the crowd popping when the performer's entrance music begins. Most crowds will pop for a wrestler's entrance, but a hot crowd will stay engaged through an entire match. These terms can also refer to the business side of wrestling, with the idea of business itself being hot, or one specific

[4] Wrestler and *New York Times* best-selling author Mick Foley was infamous for his ironic use of "cheap pops." During the course of his interviews, he would often stop and self-consciously acknowledge the name of the town he was performing in so that the crowd could explode in appreciation. He would give a gigantic, goofy smile and flash a double thumbs-up. Everyone was in on the joke ("Mick Foley").

match "popping" a large attendance figure, pay-per-view buyrate, or rating. In the context of a specific match, there is the portion referred to as the "heat segment," in which the babyface sustains prolonged punishment from the heel, building anticipation for an eventual comeback. This comeback is sometimes teased with a "false hope spot," (a "spot" is a pre-planned move designed to generate a specific audience reaction) in which the babyface will appear to be starting to reverse momentum, only to be quickly and violently subdued again by the heel. Heat is always the goal in professional wrestling.

When two wrestlers who are over have a feud that has a lot of heat behind it, that is when money is made. The strategy is always to keep heating up a conflict (in this sense, heat means both the crowd enthusiasm and the more traditional sense of two adversaries having heat with each other, and the two dovetail) between two wrestlers, leading to a final confrontation, or "blow-off" in which the conflict is finally resolved. Promoters and bookers, or the people who orchestrate the matches and the conflicts, try to keep the heat from peaking too early or blowing off the heat before the climax. (The promoter and the booker are usually not the same person. The booker's job is, essentially to script the show, to "book," or orchestrate matches, feuds and angles, which is the storyline of a feud.) Ideally, anticipation is built to a fever pitch so that the final confrontation is as heated as possible, thereby creating the most audience interest and, of course, revenue.

Aiding the wrestlers themselves in getting their moves, their storylines, and ultimately themselves over are the wrestling announcers. Even for the most dedicated wrestling fan, who frequently attends live shows, most professional wrestling is viewed

on television, and the announcer is the closest thing professional wrestling provides to a narrative voice. Traditionally, the announcer was depicted as separated from the action he was describing, above the fray in a way that cast them as a kind of "voice of reason" whose viewpoint the audience could have confidence in. Traditionally, the announcers would work to cultivate a "real sports" feeling for the presentation, as professional wrestling has always attempted to enhance its credibility by linking itself to those sports that the audience accepts as "real" (Meltzer 2-17-10). Vince McMahon's WWF, however, introduced the concept of announcers as characters, as simply another part of the show. WWF shows featured the concept of the "heel announcer," a color commentator who would openly cheer for the heels and against the babyfaces, creating a lightly antagonistic dynamic with the more traditionally "unbiased" play-by-play announcer. This dynamic, like many innovations the WWF pioneered in the 1980s, has become largely the standard in the professional wrestling industry as a whole (Meltzer 7-28-03; 6).

All of this terminology might seem a little excessive, but it is necessary to be familiar with this background information before continuing. Professional wrestling is a thoroughly unique genre, and it will be helpful to understand its language and philosophy when discussing the ways in which it uses physical pain to communicate a story to its viewers. Additionally, given professional wrestling's tendency to use loaded, physically-oriented language, it will be illuminating to discuss the sport in its own language.

Theatre of Pain: Narrative and Wrestling

Professional wrestling is typically described as "soap opera for guys," and while this is not untrue (the serialized nature and constantly evolving character conflicts are, of

course, shared traits of the two forms), the description is incomplete because it does not acknowledge the genre's defining characteristic: its similarities to live theatre. Professional wrestling has always been, and is still, a live spectacle performed for a live audience. Even with the rise of television and pay-per-view as the dominant revenue streams for the business (a distinction that, in the past, had been held by live "house shows," or unrecorded shows performed solely for fans in attendance), wrestling remains, primarily, a form of theatre. Television presentations of professional wrestling are essentially broadcasts of performances that are presented to a live audience. Actors and actresses take the stage and engage in a uniquely physical and violent form of staged dramatic conflict. The live audience necessitates that the actors communicate their movements and emotions with dramatic gestures that can be read by spectators viewing from the farthest vantage point, the cheap seats. Even soap operas, which are notorious for the overwrought and campy nature of their performances, cannot compete with the excess of a professional wrestling performance. What further sets professional wrestling apart from soap opera, however, and makes it an even more distinctive form, is the way that the audience participates in the performance.

An ideal professional wrestling audience does not merely attend the show to view the action, but to become an active participant in the show itself, making wrestling unique among mainstream forms of theater by investing the sport with a sense of immediacy and, ironically, given its staged nature, unpredictability. While any form of ongoing entertainment that is being continually produced will naturally reflect its audience and accommodate that audience's preferences, professional wrestling is unusual in that, while it is always attempting to elicit a pre-determined desired reaction from the crowd, its live

performance also responds to audience demands and reactions. Like the previous example of the Honky Tonk Man, a character that is supposed to be a face but is not getting over as such might reverse roles mid-match with his opponent, the putative heel, in an attempt to garner the audience's interest. A character that is accepted as a heel on every other show might play babyface in a show taking place in his hometown, because of the increased difficulty of getting heel heat in such a setting. In professional wrestling, a good, hot crowd does not simply watch the show; they are part of the show, creating a sense of connection to the events they are seeing unfold. While obviously predetermined and booked to follow a certain script ahead of time, professional wrestling performances are constantly evolving and adapting, even during the act of performance itself, because of the ways in which the audience is allowed, and expected, to dictate what the stakes should be. The most successful wrestlers are masters at engaging the crowd, appealing to them, encouraging them, taunting and berating them. All of these conventions increase the connection the crowd feels to the overall show and the specific wrestler. In the now-defunct professional wrestling promotion Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW), the fans were notoriously "smart," a term that refers to someone who has insider knowledge of the professional wrestling business, and, as a result, they were, in some ways, more difficult to please than average wrestling fans. Smart fans, because of their increased knowledge of the inner workings and conventions of the professional wrestling business, are often less likely to accept what they see as rote performances of standard professional wrestling tropes, forcing wrestlers and bookers to find new ways to manipulate their emotions, or to adapt standard manipulations to fit their specific mentality. This made it much more of a challenge for performers to get heat, particularly heel heat, because

whenever a wrestler was doing a good job at playing a heel, the crowd, instead of giving the negative reaction the performer was working for, reacted positively out of appreciation for his[5] talent. And while this was a connection, it was not the connection that the wrestler or the promotion desired, so sometimes the performer had to use less traditional means to accomplish his desired end. Wrestler Brian Pillman memorably achieved intense heel heat by taunting the ECW crowd with chants of "smart marks," a professional wrestling insider term of derision (which the ECW audience was, of course, familiar with) for fans who believe they are knowledgeable about the business ("mark" being the traditional – and scornful – insider term for fans, a remnant of professional wrestling's carnival origins) ("Cyberslam"). Pillman recognized the crowd's particular personality (a WWF audience from the same time period, being made up of fewer smart fans, would not have responded in the same fashion). He adjusted his performance accordingly, and the audience's investment in and connection to the character was made much more intense. To be blunt, they wanted to see him get his ass kicked, positioning him in opposition to the crowd and strengthening their connection to his opponent, the babyface.

In addition to this increased level of crowd participation, wrestling gains increased immediacy in its narratives through the use of physical pain as its primary storytelling tool, an exceptionally difficult form with which to communicate. As Scarry notes, while our own physical pain is the most immediate and unambiguous sensation

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[5] While there are, of course, both male and female professional wrestlers, for the purposes of this paper, which will primarily concern itself with mainstream American professional wrestling (which has rarely featured women in meaningful, prominent roles, and almost never in anything but non-physical supporting roles), I will use masculine pronouns to refer to the performers. Almost all of these conventions, however, would be equally applicable to female professional wrestlers.

that exists, communicating physical pain to another person, or, indeed, an entire audience, is a challenging and slippery task:

> Thus when one speaks about 'one's own physical pain' and about 'another person's physical pain,' one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct orders of events. For the person whose pain it is, it is 'effortlessly' grasped (that is, even with the most heroic effort it cannot not be grasped); while for the person outside the sufferer's body, what is 'effortless' is not grasping it (it is easy to remain wholly unaware of its existence; even with effort, one may remain in doubt about its existence or may retain the astonishing freedom of denying its existence; and, finally, if with the best effort of sustained attention one successfully apprehends it, the aversiveness of the 'it' one comprehends will only be a shadowy fraction of the actual 'it'). (4)

Thus professional wrestling sets itself the task of making that which is least intelligible, the physical pain of another, intelligible to its audience as its primary means of communicating its narratives. And while emotional sensations exist in the storylines of professional wrestling, they always play a secondary role to the physical. When we think of wrestling we think of *physical* pain, not mental or emotional. While emotion may underlie a particular match, it is not the engine that drives it; it is not the goal. The fight is everything. The display of physical pain, and the effort to effectively communicate it to the audience, is what makes professional wrestling truly unique as a form of entertainment.

Using pain as a means to communicate a narrative lends increased immediacy to professional wrestling's reality. Because physical pain is used as a storytelling tool, it transcends the boundaries of "another person's physical pain," making the narratives that play out intensely visceral and compelling for the audience; "another person's physical pain" becomes increasingly intelligible as "one's own physical pain," which, as Scarry points out, cannot be ignored and is "effortlessly" grasped. When viewing professional wrestling on television, it is common to see the live audience themselves reacting physically to the performance they are watching; performances of particularly violent moves and strikes are accompanied by vehement reactions from the audience; flinching, wincing, looking away from the distress being enacted on the stage of the wrestling ring. Additionally, even emotional pain is primarily communicated through physical means. If a wrestler is dejected following a heartbreaking loss he will shuffle down to the ring instead of striding confidently, replacing his normal physical demeanor with one that communicates his inner disappointment: an emotional limp. All sensations, but especially pain, are brought to the level of the physical, expressed by bodily actions as much as possible. Professional wrestling's most distinguishing feature, then, is the way that it performs the singularly difficult task of making us identify with not simply the emotional pain (which is true of many forms of art), but the intense physical pain of another, someone not ourselves, by using physical signals to make that pain intelligible.

Facial expressions, in particular, are utilized to help a wrestler communicate emotion and sensation, especially, again, pain. Because reading facial expressions is one of the key ways people communicate with each other outside of language which is usually not an available tool to effectively communicate during an actual wrestling

match,[6] exaggerated facial expressions are employed by wrestlers to convey every type of feeling. Rage, fear, defeat, determination, and triumph are all displayed on wrestlers' faces, and the most successful are generally the ones who are adept at using their faces to tell stories. When Bryan Danielson, a very popular independent wrestler, was signed by World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE, formerly the WWF) he changed his signature hold, the Cattle Mutilation, which was very over with wrestling fans, to a different hold. One of the major reasons he did so was that the hold positioned his opponent's body in such a way that an audience was unable to see the opponent's face, making it impossible for the wrestler to communicate the pain he was in (Waldman). As an independent wrestler, Danielson had usually performed in smaller, more intimate venues in which it was easier to make physical sensations intelligible to an audience using voice and other, more subtle physical tools. Because Danielson, as an employee of WWE, the largest professional wrestling company in the world, would now be in front of very large crowds he realized he needed a hold that would allow his opponent to effectively communicate the physical pain he was causing, making the audience more able to understand and identify with that pain and, by extension, getting Danielson, his opponent, and the hold itself more over.

The Story of Torture: A World of Hurt

As noted earlier, a traditional professional wrestling match is constructed in such a way that the babyface is the one absorbing punishment for most of the body of the match. That the babyface, and not the heel, is the recipient of the lion's share of the

[6] The submission match is sometimes an exception to this rule. The object of this type of match is to not simply pin the opponent, but to make him verbally submit. In some forms of this match (usually labeled "I Quit" matches) the objective is to make your opponent announce his submission on a microphone held by the referee, amplifying it so that the entire audience can clearly hear him giving up and admitting defeat, thereby increasing his humiliation.

physical abuse in a match is crucial to the way professional wrestling creates a narrative. The most important section of the match, from which the central meaning is derived, resembles nothing else so much as an extended torture session, in which the babyface is slowly and elaborately punished physically and the audience is forced (or allowed) to identify with his pain and experience, in Scarry's terms, the creation of a new and "incontestable reality" (27). The heel slowly, methodically beats on the babyface, pausing after every move so that the babyface can make the physical pain intelligible for the audience, allowing them to fully register the sensation of the torture they are witnessing. Scarry describes the way in which torture "[converts]...absolute pain into the fiction of absolute power," and this is what the heel does in heat segments in which he punishes the babyface, giving the audience the opportunity to fully comprehend the new reality that is being created in front of them (27).

The babyface, as the protagonist, is the audience's point of identification, and the key to wrestling's communication of narrative is the babyface's ability to effectively display pain in such a way that the audience can identify with that pain, can feel it; the pain must be "incontestably real" despite the fact that everyone knows it is fake.[7] While there are babyfaces who fly in the face of this trend, such as the Road Warriors, who, while beginning as monster heels, became so popular they were turned babyface, traditionally the most effective babyfaces are skilled at showing weakness through the

[7] Of course, not all pain in professional wrestling is fake. Here, again, the line between reality and performance is blurry. Professional wrestlers, like all athletes, are often injured, and are frequently sustain real, "shoot" injuries, but these are not necessarily communicated to the audience. A wrestler may actually dislocate his shoulder during a match, but not sell that injury because it is not part of the storyline of the match, while selling the intense worked pain his opponent is inflicting on his leg. The "incontestably real" pain being intentionally communicated to the audience is always in service of professional wrestling's constructed narratives and reality.

> On the simplest level, the agent displayed is the weapon. Testimony given by torture victims from many different countries almost inevitably includes *being made to stare at the weapon with which they were about to be hurt*: prisoners of the Greek Junta (1967-71), for example, were made to contemplate a wall arrangement of whips, canes, clubs and rods, were made to examine the size of a torturer's fist and the monogrammed ring which 'he wore and which made his blows more painful,' or were compelled to look at a bull's pizzle coated with the dried blood of a fellow prisoner. (27, emphasis mine)

In professional wrestling, the weapon with which the babyface is about to be hurt is the body of his opponent, and while the babyface is not necessarily able to observe that weapon, the audience, who is identifying with that babyface, always is.[9] They are compelled to watch the heel, the weapon itself, stalk the babyface, setting up and executing each attack. The pattern becomes one of watching the weapon prepare itself, then viewing helplessly as it performs its task. The heel taunts and berates the babyface as well as the audience, who bears witness to his dominance. Their taunts sometimes take physical form, such as wrestler Scott Steiner's habit of dropping an elbow on his prone opponent's body, then rolling over to perform a series of push-ups to demonstrate that he, unlike his rival, is still physically fresh and capable.[10] Heels, much more than babyfaces, often go through elaborate, even cartoonish setups before moves to make sure that the audience has time to fully contemplate the action that is about to take place, and

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[9] Professional wrestling's obsession with fantastic, over-the-top bodies takes on new meaning in light of this idea of the body as a weapon.

[10] Because this is an established and accepted spot (it is over with the crowd), Steiner performs it whether he is playing heel or babyface, due to the Pavlovian reaction it inevitably receives from the crowd, but, because of its inarguably taunting nature, it is a heel mannerism.

to imagine its consequences. Each blow the heel strikes against the babyface creates a narrative of agency and helplessness. On the stage of the wrestling ring a world is created for the spectator through the drama of torture.[11]

What becomes most important, then, in the heat segment's almost fetishistic display of torture, is the impression of the heel's agency, a "fantastic illusion of power" (Scarry 28). Despite the fact that traditional professional wrestling matches often start with a section that establishes the babyface's superiority in an evenly contested match-up of physical skill and/or mental acumen, eventually the heel's brute strength or willingness to use underhanded techniques make him dominant. The heel's power, through his repeated displays of agency, is raised to the level of "incontestable reality." The drama taking place in the wrestling ring during the heat sequence encompasses the three phenomena Scarry identifies as "invariable and simultaneous" in torture:

> First, pain is inflicted on the person in ever-intensifying ways. Second, the pain, continually amplified within the person's body, is also amplified in the sense that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person's body. Third, the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power, a translation made possible by the obsessive mediation of agency. (28)

The heel's "obsessive mediation," his constant and excessive reminders of his physical domination and authority, effects a "perceptual shift which converts the vision of suffering into the wholly illusory, but, to the torturers and the regime they represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power" (Scarry 27). This spectacle translates the

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[11] Scarry, discussing the way torture converts pain and its infliction into an illusion of power, notes that "[i]t is not accidental that in the torturers' idiom the room in which the brutality occurs was called the 'production room' in the Phillipines, the 'cinema room' in South Vietnam, and the 'blue lit stage' in Chile," names which allude to torture's capacity to manufacture artificial reality, "a grotesque piece of compensatory drama" (28).

"incontestably real" pain, registered by the spectator, into an illusion of the heels' (and the "regimes they represent") absolute power and agency over the babyface and, by extension, the audience itself (and the regimes they represent). The drama of physical pain reduces the world to a simple and unambiguous contrast of power and powerlessness; coercion and helplessness; oppression and subjugation. There is no grey area.

Physical pain is supremely suited to accommodate this shift to such a stark dichotomy because of the way it effects one's perception of the world. Roy F. Baumeister, citing Scarry, discusses the ways in which physical pain impairs one's knowledge of the "real world," decreasing awareness to "the immediate present, both spatially and temporally" (38). He reiterates Scarry's idea about the "incorrigibility of pain (i.e., it is impossible to be mistaken about being in pain)," suggesting that it allows a "low level awareness of oneself existing as a physical body" (39). Because physical pain performs this singularly reductive function, it is uniquely able to provide an escape not only from the reality of the self (which is the main focus of Baumeister's argument and will be discussed in greater detail later), thereby aiding in the audience's identification with the babyface, but an escape from the "reality" of the larger world. All complicating factors are discarded, leaving only an almost empty stage containing the body in pain and the agent inflicting that pain. Theodor Reik cites this redirecting of attention as a key component of masochism, repeatedly using the example of a man staring persistently at one corner of a room as a metaphor for the masochistic subject (Reik). By staring intently at that corner, Reik points out, the impression is given to an observer that there is something of great importance to the subject in that corner, but the intense concentration

on that corner is nothing more than a distraction to keep the observer from noticing what is going on in the opposite corner, which the subject desires to keep hidden. In the example of professional wrestling, however, the line between the subject and the observer collapses, with the observer using the masochistic display to distract himself.

The "real world" has, in fact, already been abandoned through the audience's willing submission to the arbitrary, inconsistent, and capricious "reality" of the world of professional wrestling, which places the heel in an advantageous position from the beginning. There is no dependable or consistent law in wrestling. Occasionally an authority figure appears,[12] but he is as likely to work against the babyface as to support him. Wrestling reality exists separately from normal society, in which hitting a man in the head with a sledgehammer would result in jail time for the perpetrator, and likely death for the victim. The reality of the professional wrestling world gives the upper hand to the heel, because almost anything is tolerated, as long as the referee doesn't see it. There is no tangible reward for fair play beyond the increased likelihood of physical pain. It is not unheard of for a wrestler to be rewarded in a storyline for upright behavior, but it is much more likely that he will find satisfaction by sinking to the level of his antagonist,

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[12] Since the late 1990s the conceit of the visible, on-screen authority figure has become an increasingly popular convention. This trend was prompted by the wildly successful, long-running feud between "Stone Cold" Steve Austin and his boss (in storyline and in reality), Vince McMahon. McMahon, playing an exaggerated caricature of himself, used his authority to place his adversary in disadvantageous scenarios, and fans enjoyed seeing Austin prevail over his nefarious employer. The kayfabe position of evil authority figure became ubiquitous, partly because of the ways it allows otherwise illogical storyline developments to take place (a babyface is forced to fight three opponents at once, for example), and partly because, at the time it became popular, the three major wrestling companies were actually run by three men (McMahon in WWE, Eric Bischoff in World Championship Wrestling (WCW), and Paul Heyman in ECW) who were naturally charismatic on-air performers, particularly as heels. The position is most effectively filled by a heel, because of the need to continually keep the babyface at as much of a disadvantage as possible, and a heel authority figure will always side with the heel wrestlers. As time has gone on, the convention has become increasingly stale, but it remains a feature of almost all wrestling promotions because of the freedom it allows bookers to book patently ridiculous storylines and scenarios, which can be attributed to the "evil" boss.

answering the challenge of the heel by wallowing in ultra-violence. Again, all exchanges revert to the level of physicality.

These techniques combine to create a new reality in which the audience, through the body of the babyface, is encouraged to witness the sensation of the physical pain of another person being tortured. The phenomenon of another's physical pain made intelligible confers immediacy to the drama being played out, creating an illusion of power and helplessness that is at once entirely constructed and "incontestably real." Because of physical pain's ability to obscure everything but its own existence and circumstances, the pain that the audience is viewing prompts them to forget the larger reality that the narrative in front of them is omitting, making the spectacle of torture they are witnessing seem to be the only reality. The physical pain the audience is watching (and experiencing to some extent) cannot be ignored, and it cannot be placed into context. The world begins and ends with physical pain.

We Hurt the Ones We Love Best: Physical Pain as Self-Preservation in Professional Wrestling

The sensation of physical pain not only has the effect of shrinking one's perception, reordering the world around itself, but also has the power to effectively alter the subject's understanding of the self. Baumeister, in his discussion of the causes and effects of masochism, suggests that the main reason that physical pain is attractive and pleasurable to the masochistic subject is that it allows an "escape from self" because "awareness of self as a symbolic, schematic, and choosing entity is removed and replaced with a low-level awareness of self as physical body and locus of immediate sensations, or with a new identity with transformed symbolic meaning" (29). This effect is desirable

because "high level self-awareness can lead to anxiety and discomfort" (29). Baumeister cites evidence that not only are masochistic subjects often normal, nonclinical people, but also that they often perform socially at high levels, and he quotes a previous finding that "'masochists represent often ideal whole men'" (31). He explains this by theorizing that "[e]xerting responsibility and maintaining esteem may become emotionally draining, yet the self that is identified with agency and esteem cannot easily relinquish them," necessitating a temporary escape from the pressures of self (36). It is very easy to imagine the appeal of this kind of escape, particularly when the "normal" self is highly invested in an ideology, or set of values and beliefs, whose demands are difficult to achieve and maintain (and even contradictory), such as masculinity. Baumeister argues that "[h]igh levels of esteem and agency (or responsibility) produce the most complex and elaborate selves, which may also be the most burdensome selves" (36). More than others, these kinds of people "seek to avoid and escape self-awareness" because of the intense responsibilities involved in maintaining their normal, everyday selves (34). Citing arguments that "people are generally unable to live up to their ideals and goals," Baumeister suggests that "[a]s a result, [highly functioning individuals] may seek the strongest modes of escape—such as masochism" (35-6). The pressures of ideology can be temporarily relieved by relinquishing its power. The world of the self becomes so complicated and difficult to manage that the subject gains pleasure from shrinking it down to something smaller and simpler, more manageable, turning reality into the point of a needle.

Once this end is achieved, it becomes possible, in this new state of being, to reinvent the self. Once "[o]ne's knowledge of the world is temporarily forgotten, and

attention is narrowed to the immediate present, both spatially and temporally," it becomes possible to create a new self, unencumbered by "interpersonal and ideological commitments" (Baumeister 38). Baumeister builds on Scarry's ideas of torture and pain, theorizing that because "[p]ain makes reality malleable," the aim for the masochistic subject is an escape from the pressures of the normal, "real" self: "one could argue that changing one's identity is the ultimate fulfillment of masochistic desires to be rid of one's ordinary self" (43). Baumeister acknowledges the drawbacks of this strategy, namely that "pain usually comes with injury (which has practical consequences)," but cites evidence that the masochistic subject "obtains pain without injury, and they seek carefully controlled doses of pain administered by an intimate partner" (38). In this way the masochistic subject is able to enjoy "pain's narcotic effects" while escaping its consequences. Free from the burdens of the self and fear of physical injury, the masochistic subject is allowed to assume a new identity.

Another key component of the masochistic escape Baumeister describes is the presence of an audience during the ritual. The audience, however, must be made up of strangers, because "[a]udiences can promote self-awareness, but they only promote the awareness of the person's awareness of his or her own normal identity if they know who the person is" (44). The goal of escape from self is sabotaged if the subject is surrounded by an audience anchoring him to the "real" world and his "real" self: "As in brainwashing, identity change is facilitated by the removal of all social support for the to-be-discarded identity and replacement of them with witnesses who know only the new, transformed identity" (44). Again, all context of the "real" world is erased, creating the

possibility for the construction of a new world. This time, however, the person being tortured is the one who is in control, the one constructing and controlling the illusion.

Professional wrestling strongly mirrors the phenomenon Baumeister describes, making its displays of torture elaborate fantasies in which the power and agency of dominant values and culture are temporarily disavowed and a less troubled, "persecuted" persona is adopted, obscuring and alleviating anxieties brought about by contradictions and inconsistencies in the character, or the "self," of dominant ideology. The babyface, as the personification of the values of the mainstream, in particular the dominant modes of masculintity, essentially stands in for that culture as a whole, playing the masochistic subject and relinquishing its power (temporarily) and facilitating a diminished awareness of self. This allows contradictions and failings in the dominant culture and ideology to be erased, and even displaced onto other groups who, in the "real" world do not possess the same agency they do in this fantasy world. The physical pain the babyface is subjected to obliterates all obligation and commitment to anything except the artificially constructed scenario being played out. Tensions and inadequacies that are difficult to resolve in daily life recede with the abdication of control, and are replaced by the new reality, one in which the babyface (and the dominant culture) can assume the role of victim without responsibility. And because wrestling is "fake," there is no fear of injury, leaving the spectator free to enjoy "pain's narcotic effects" without consequence.[13]

The live audience is vital in creating and maintaining this illusion. They know only the constructed fantasy wrestling character. Baumeister points out that it is necessary that the audience be unfamiliar with the "real" identity of the sufferer.

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[13] This idea is greatly complicated by the fact that, in the last two decades, professional wrestling has been plagued by an epidemic of premature deaths among its performers, a trend which highlights the very real dangers of professional wrestling and its lifestyle for its perfomers (Meltzer 1-12-09; 9-13-10).

However, a professional wrestling audience is also aware that wrestling is scripted, that what they are seeing isn't real. But it is sufficient, in this setting, that the audience is willing to play along, in the sense that they are also discarding their own identities. Their investment in the dominant ideology makes them virtual sufferers along with the babyface.[14] Potentially, this makes the audience even more effective in helping achieve the desired loss of self: they are aware of the fabricated nature of the spectacle, but are as invested in disavowing "reality" as the masochistic subject. The new, constructed reality is agreed upon, at least for the duration of the performance. The ideal hot crowd is one that is fully invested in the babyface and the dominant culture he represents, and shares a desire to escape from the problematic aspects of that culture through his pain.

One of Hulk Hogan's best remembered matches provides an interesting example of this phenomenon, because of the ways in which the babyface and the heel so purposefully embody the dominant attitudes and a (wholly fabricated) challenge to those attitudes. During the first Gulf War in the early 1990s, the WWF tried to capitalize on popular support for the war by creating a storyline in which Sgt. Slaughter, a long-time patriotic babyface, would turn against his country and side with Iraq, in the form of General Adnan (longtime manager Adnan El-Kaissie, who actually was from Iraq).[15] He was characterized as Saddam Hussein's "personal emissary" in the United States (Meltzer 9/22/03: 2), even doing an interview in which he showed off a pair of wrestling boots he claimed Hussein had given to him as a gift (WWF Superstars 12-19-90).

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[14] Wrestling's audience is, of course, made up of members of marginalized groups, but this audience can be typically expected to share a collective investment in the dominant ideology (meaning dominant values and beliefs).

[15] Eventually, Hogan's old nemesis, the Iron Sheik, whom Hogan defeated to win his first world championship, would be added to the group under the name "Colonel Mustafa," presumably because it was well known that he was Iranian.

Hogan, of course, had long been the All-American babyface, perpetually wearing a cross and encouraging children to say their prayers and take their vitamins. He was very much the ultimate professional wrestling hero of the 1980s; a gigantic blond muscleman with a chemically-enhanced physique who fought and defeated all manner of monstrous cartoon foes, mirroring the decade's preoccupation with huge muscles and conservative values, a phenomenon investigated by Susan Jeffords in her book *Hard Bodies.*[16] A reaction to the putative "weak, defeatist, inactive and feminine" Jimmy Carter presidency, the "hard body" Ronald Reagan era focused on "spectacular narratives about characters who stand for individualism, liberty, militarism and a mythic heroism" (Jeffords 10;16). In actual world events, the Gulf War was precipitated actions not directly involving the United States: the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. The United States decided to involve itself in the conflict, attacking a much smaller and militarily weaker country. The war was described as a "non-event" by philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who famously argued that "the Gulf War did not take place," that it was nothing more than an exhibition of military power, an orchestrated media illusion that took place on the nightly news: "[o]ne of the two adversaries is a rug salesman, the other an arms salesman…they are both crooks" (65). As opposed to this dismissal, the WWF built its conflict between America (Hogan) and Iraq (Slaughter and Adnan) into an epic confrontation at its largest show of the year, Wrestlemania. American dominance was disavowed by the very fact that Slaughter, along with his cohort, was allowed to hold the WWF Championship, placing Hulk Hogan, the American warrior, in the position of challenger, in addition to the fact that he

[16] Hogan most often was paired with physical freaks, such as King Kong Bundy or Earthquake, pitting his idealized manhood against the unnatural, out-of-control masculinity they personified.

was outnumbered two to one by Slaughter and Adnan (unlike the American military, which dwarfed the Iraqi military).

Reading the narrative of this match in terms of its strategic deployment of physical suffering will demonstrate the ways in which pain can obscure the larger context in which the narrative is taking place. When the match begins, Slaughter comes to the ring with Adnan, waving the Iraqi flag. After a display in which Slaughter salutes the Iraqi flag, Hogan comes to the ring, of course waving the American flag. (Neither instance of flag waving would necessarily be considered cheap heat in these circumstances, since the entire nature of the conflict is based on two warring countries.) At the beginning of the match, Hogan is dominant, displaying his natural superiority. He sends Slaughter literally bouncing around the ring with his attacks.[17] Slaughter must retreat to the outside of the ring to escape Hogan's superior strength and ability. Slaughter attempts to cheat to gain the upper hand, but he is unsuccessful. Finally, after this prolonged sequence has firmly established Hogan's superiority, Hogan ascends to the top rope. The announcers are shocked, noting that this is not a tactic Hogan typically employs; however they have previously made it clear that Hogan, influenced by emotion and patriotism, is not behaving normally in this match, calling him the "new Hulk Hogan" ("Hulk Hogan"). Adnan interferes and allows Slaughter to slam Hogan from the top rope. After this transition, Slaughter takes over on offense and the heat sequence begins.

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[17] A notable element of the "WWF/E style" of wrestling is its pronounced bumping requirements for its heels (relative to the styles of other professional wrestling promotions). The heels are expected to take exaggerated and repeated bumps for the babyfaces, popping back up quickly so that they can be sent flying again. This makes the WWF/E style very physically taxing for the wrestler playing heel.

Slaughter dominates with almost entirely illegal holds and maneuvers. He rams Hogan into the steel ring post, chokes him with an extension cord, and hits him across the shoulders with a chair more than once. Oddly, all of these infractions take place in full view of the referee (normally they would occur while the referee was distracted, especially when a heel manager is present). The sense is created that there is no higher authority in this match to keep things in order: Hogan (America) must triumph over evil and set things right on his own, without the help of sanctioned or official support. Slaughter stalks Hogan, who stumbles away from each blow. He begins working Hogan's back. He places Hogan in a Boston Crab, a submission hold that primarily punishes the back. Hogan suffers in the hold for an extended period, despite the fact that he is right next to the ropes (grabbing or touching the ropes would cause the referee to break the hold). He tries to power his way out of the hold at one point, but is unsuccessful. He shakes his head and reaches out in a pleading manner, communicating his anguish. At this point, America is at the mercy of Iraq's physical might. Finally Hogan reaches out and grabs the ropes, breaking the hold. Slaughter continues to stomp on his back, exhorting him to fight back. Slaughter leaves the ring again, and with Hogan draped across the bottom rope trying to struggle to his feet, Slaughter hits him in the head with a chair, cutting Hogan's head. Hogan sells this dramatically, scooting across the ring and practically convulsing as blood covers the right side of his face. Slaughter tries to pin Hogan, but, strangely, this time Adnan is inadvertently distracting the referee from making a count.[18] Finally, Slaughter places Hogan in his finishing hold, the Camel

[18] This kind of spot – a "visual fall," in which the audience sees that one wrestler has another beaten, but for whatever reason the referee is not present to count the pin or accept the submission – is usually used with the babyface making the pin, so that the audience can see that he "should have won" before he is cheated out of the match by the heel, building heat for the heel. When the spot is done to a heel, in this

Clutch.[19] Hogan suffers in the hold, grimacing in pain and shaking his hands impotently. In a false hope spot, Hogan powers out of the hold, standing up with Slaughter on his back. He attempts to run Slaughter into the corner turnbuckle, but Slaughter slides off his back, running him into the corner instead. Finally, however, Hogan does make his comeback: after Slaughter attempts to pin Hogan, symbolically covering him in the Iraqi flag, Hogan magically revives, "Hulking up" and tearing apart the flag and defeating Slaughter with his trademark leg drop, bringing the title back to the United States and restoring order to the world.[20]

This match powerfully demonstrates the way in which wrestling plays out Baumeister's scenario, using pain to reinvent reality. After the stage is set, with Hogan playing the role of America and Slaughter personifying Iraq, and America's natural physical superiority is firmly established, the heat sequence, with its focus on the babyface's physical suffering, effectively excludes all existing knowledge of American military might, and the historical context for the "real" conflict: the reality becomes one in which the United States is being attacked and tortured by a dominant and cruel foe with superior physical might. The audience knows that the spectacle is fake, but the immediacy of the physical pain being communicated, along with the desire for escape from the contradictions of "reality" (the less than inspiring feeling of easily dispatching a pitifully inferior enemy, the shallow and manipulative public relations efforts to create enthusiasm and support for the war), combine to create a powerful and reassuring feeling

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fashion, it usually precipitates or foreshadows tension between two heels who are about to turn on each other, although in this case it would be months before Slaughter's group turned against him, so its function was more to keep some heat on Slaughter so that the feud could continue past Wrestlemania.

[19] The Cobra Clutch, a sleeper-type hold, had long been Sgt. Slaughter's finishing hold, but once he turned Iraqi sympathizer he adopted the Camel Clutch, the Iron Sheik's famous finishing hold. Significantly, Iraq and Iran are interchangeable.

[20] "Hulking up" is the ironic term given to Hogan's persistent habit of making superhuman comebacks to win his matches.

of "incontestable reality" in which there is no objective except to fight against the physical assault of a sadistic and unrelenting torturer. The spectators, fully aware of the artificiality of the spectacle, agree to participate in the performance. The "self" of the United States is freed from all complicating factors, reimagined as a simple and unambiguous force of good struggling against an unambiguous (and entirely fabricated) foreign threat.[21] The dominant (and troubled) self can escape its anxieties by creating a new, masochistic reality in which there is no responsibility and no possibility of meaningful consequences. "Pain's narcotic effects" allow the audience to escape from "reality" into a fantasy world where the intense focus on pain renders everything else, specifically all higher-level awareness of self and of others, blurry or even invisible. It is a nice fantasy, if you can pull it off. The problem, of course, is that it is just a fantasy.

Blinding Pain: Physical Pain's Negative Effect on Perception

While the masochistic fantasy played out in the professional wrestling ring can offer an attractive and effective escape from the anxieties created by the dominant self, it does nothing to actually resolve those anxieties. It is solely a temporary respite from the failings and contradictions that are inherent in the self. Once the match is ended, those inconsistencies remain. The masochistic spectacle can even do damage, because the disavowal that it facilitates can make it easier to ignore the problematic aspects of the self, perpetuating negative features by allowing them to be discounted or even displaced.

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[21] It should be acknowledged, however, that while this particular match provides an excellent example of the ideas being discussed, the feud between Hogan and Slaughter was a notable failure. The WWF was justifiably criticized for exploiting the war to sell tickets, and the storyline was met with indifference by their fanbase, which was most likely turned off by the same sense of poor taste. The promotion had hoped the match would drive record-setting ticket sales for Wrestlemania, but when it became apparent that that goal was a fantasy, they reported that bomb threats had forced them to move the show to a smaller venue (Meltzer 9/22/03: 2). It is also possible that, as Jeffords agrues, the feud was a failure because, during the George H.W. Bush presidency that followed Reagan's, there was a "negation" of the hard body hero typified by Hogan "in favor a more internalized and emotional kind of heroic icon" and the "hard bodied warriors…seemed no longer to provide the same 'national pleasure' they had in earlier years" (22-3).

For example, instead of understanding the United States as an invading force, Iraq could be shaped into the imperious assaulting entity. Using physical pain, "reality" can be fashioned into whatever is most psychologically comfortable for the masochistic subject, but, back in the "real world," marginalized people and groups in "real" pain actually exist, and the fantasy renders them invisible.

The great danger of effectively using pain as a storytelling device, as professional wrestling does, is that its powerful nature can render everything else, including the pain of others, unreal. Once physical pain is successfully communicated, it becomes even more "effortless" to ignore the pain of others who exist outside of the masochistic spectacle. Scarry notes the pitfalls inherent in the successful communication of physical pain by artists, warning that "they may themselves collectively come to be thought of as the most authentic class of sufferers, and thus may inadvertently appropriate concern away from others in radical need of assistance" (11). A potentially powerful function of the masochistic fantasy for the masochistic subject, then, is to assuage his own guilt over his lack of concern for others and, indeed, his possible role in their very need and lack of agency, by creating a reality in which they do not exist, blocking them out and erasing them through the use of his own pain. Their pain becomes not only impossible to comprehend, it ceases to exist. Baumeister notes that "the weight of evidence suggests that society's real victims are underrepresented among masochists" (45). Because of their everyday, normal lack of agency, they may not feel the need to escape from a highly elaborate and burdensome self, not to mention that they do not have access to the resources to effect such a transformation.

Professional wrestling is unique as a form of masochistic sanctuary, not only because of the scale on which the escape takes place, but because it recasts not just the masochistic subject; while the dominant cultural groups are allowed to assume the identity of the sufferer, marginalized groups can be recast as oppressor, essentially flipping the script and redistributing social power to aid in the masochistic fantasy. For example, professional wrestling has a long history of effeminate or implicitly homosexual heels who challenge the more traditionally masculine babyfaces. Goldust, a character played by Dustin Rhodes, the son of legendary wrestler "The American Dream," Dusty Rhodes, offers a particularly strong example of this phenomenon.[22] Placed into a feud with Razor Ramon, a character based on the movie *Scarface* whose defining characteristic was his overwhelming "machismo," Goldust repeatedly insinuated that he was sexually attracted to his adversary (RAW 12-18-95). In another feud, Ahmed Johnson was injured during a match and taken to the hospital. As he was being rushed to the ambulance, strapped to a hospital gurney, Goldust appeared and kissed him passionately on the lips (leaving a tell-tale ring of gold paint around Johnson's mouth as a visual marker) while suggestively massaging his chest, reversing a history of brutal and violent homosexual persecution by creating a scenario in which a powerless, literally incapacitated heterosexual man is sexually victimized by a perverse homosexual

[22] Goldust was conceived as a bizarre, implicitly homosexual character who was obsessed with Hollywood, wearing a gold bodysuit and face paint so that he resembled an Academy Award statue, and quoting lines from classic films in his interviews (in an interview during his feud with Ahmed Johnson, an African-American, he called his opponent a "mighty Mandingo") (RAW; 6-3-96). The character was a striking departure from the norm for the then cartoonish and kid-friendly WWF. The homosexual aspect of his character was strongly played up, with announcers wondering aloud whether these characteristics were genuine or if the film-obsessed Goldust was simply "acting," attempting to gain a psychological edge over his opponents by preying on their homophobia (RAW 1-15-96). When the character was eventually turned babyface, the key element in his switch to fan favorite was a vehement disavowal of his flirtations with homosexuality; his "Director," Marlena, was revealed to be his wife, and their daughter was paraded in front of fans to cement his status as "normal." Additionally, when he was asked point-blank by announcer Jerry Lawler whether or not he was "queer," Goldust responded by answering "No," and punching Lawler (RAW; 12-16-96).

predator. With this act, which announcer Vince McMahon described as "one of the most revolting things we've witnessed in the history of Monday Night RAW," a powerless, marginalized group was elevated to the position of oppressor of the dominant, "normal" sexuality, effectively diminishing the mental, emotional, and physical pain endured by that marginalized group at the hands of the dominant culture in reality (Raw; 5-27-96). The two groups switched places for the purpose of the masochistic fantasy. Ahmed Johnson's eventual violent revenge (and, by extension, the dominant culture's violence against homosexuals) was thus justified and normalized by this fantasy persecution. Because the context of the conflict between dominant and marginalized cultures was concealed, the pervasive masculine fantasy of sexually predatory gay men could be enacted without complication. The demands of being a "real man" no longer conflicted with traditional American notions of diversity and tolerance, because those things no longer existed. The situation was reduced to a clear and unambiguous physical conflict. There was simply physical aggression, which demanded a physical response. Everyone was a winner, except actual homosexuals.

To the Pain: How Physical Pain Works to Create (and Destroy) a Satisfying Narrative

As a way of demonstrating the importance of physical pain, and the specific ways in which it works in professional wrestling, it will be useful to look at a couple of examples: one, a submission match between Bret "Hitman" Hart and "Stone Cold" Steve Austin at Wrestlemania 13, in which pain was used very effectively to engage the crowd in a specific, complicated role-reversal, and another, Bret Hart vs. Mr. McMahon at Wrestlemania 26, in which the conclusion of an epic "storyline" was ruined by the ineffective use of physical pain in a match. These examples reveal wrestling's reliance

on the use of physical pain for masochistic pleasure, because they demonstrate the way in which the babyface's suffering must be highlighted in order for an audience of spectators to be fully invested in the spectacle.

Hart vs. Austin

First, an example of pain done correctly. One of the most famous matches of the modern era of professional wrestling took place at Wrestlemania 13 in Chicago, on March 23, 1997 between Bret "Hitman" Hart and "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, with mixed martial artist Ken Shamrock as guest referee. Wrestlemania is traditionally the high-point of the year in the WWF/E, the show that all the major storylines build toward and peak at. Fans have been conditioned to expect the biggest matches and definitive conclusions to long-running feuds, and while the "no holds barred" submission match between Hart and Austin at Wrestlemania 13 did not provide closure, it marked a critical turning point in the character of each wrestler and in the ongoing conflict between the two.

Hart, the most prominent member of a famous Canadian wrestling family, was a longtime babyface and model of quiet effieciency (his nickname, "The Excellence of Execution," gestured toward his no-frills, businesslike approach). He had returned months earlier, after a lengthy sabbatical, to answer the challenges of "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, a foul-mouthed, confrontational braggart. Austin, in the midst of his first real main-event push, began calling out the absent Hart, deriding his accomplishments and stature. Hart returned to answer the challenge, and in their first meeting scored a hard fought victory that did not definitively answer the question of who was the better wrestler. Austin continued to talk and attacked Hart whenever the opportunity arose. At

the Royal Rumble, the WWF's annual battle royal to decide who will fight for the world championship at Wrestlemania, Austin cheated and eliminated Hart illegally, eventually winning the match (Royal Rumble).[23] After repeatedly being "screwed"[24] out of opportunities to gain retribution, Hart's patience began to fray (Wrestlemania 13). While still clearly the babyface in the feud, the announcers began to subtly suggest that Hart was a "whiner," that he was not the Bret Hart that they had previously known. Hart's in-ring demeanor, however, had not changed. He still largely engaged in fair play and won his matches through displays of superior skill. Remaining the clear heel, Austin, for his part, continued to taunt and attack Hart at every opportunity, but the fans were increasingly appreciative of his brash talk and unvarnished aggressiveness. Austin's behavior was not changing, but the focus on him shifted from his viciousness and underhandedness – heel qualities – to his rugged toughness and his uncompromising nature, more traditionally masculine babyface traits. After a championship cage match in which he was again thwarted due to outside interference, Hart snapped. He went on a profanity-laced tirade and physically assaulted Vince McMahon (RAW 3-17-97).[25] With this, the stage was set for Hart and Austin's climactic confrontation at Wrestlemania, a submission match in which pinfalls (pinning an opponent's shoulders to the mat for a count of three – the traditional method of winning a match) did not count – one man

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[23] Because of the contested nature of the outcome of the match, another match was made to decide the "real" winner of the championship opportunity at Wrestlemania, which neither Hart nor Austin won (WWF In Your House).

[24] The word "screwed," in professional wrestling, is forever linked to Bret Hart. It was the word he repeatedly used to describe his treatment in the months leading up to his heel turn, and the connection was cemented after the events of the "Montreal Screwjob," a match in which he was double-crossed by his employer, Vince McMahon.

[25] McMahon, while acknowledged as the real-life owner of the WWF, was still, at this point, primarily a television announcer, having not yet transformed into the evil "Mr. McMahon" character. And while profanity and violence against non-wrestlers and authority figures was to become a staple of the "Attitude Era" WWF which was to follow (led, in fact, by "Stone Cold" Steve Austin), Hart's actions were shocking at the time, especially coming from long-time fan-favorite Bret Hart.

would be forced to submit to the other, to admit that he could no longer stand the pain and was defeated. It is important to note that the very nature of the submission match put Austin at a disadvantage, because Hart's famous finishing hold was a submission hold, while Austin had no established submission holds in his repertoire. The type of match they were competing in, before it even began, placed Austin in the position of working from underneath.

The match itself, and its immediate aftermath, provide an example of the power of physical pain to not only block out the realities that exist outside the world of professional wrestling, but the storyline realities of the wrestling world as well. Right from the beginning of the match it is clear who will be portrayed as the more dynamic of the two performers. Austin's entrance is augmented by a large black glass plate with his "Austin 3:16" logo on it that shatters in concert with the breaking glass sound that punctuates his entrance music. Hart simply walks to the ring, determined but subdued. The crowd is supportive of both men, but it is clear that Austin's supporters are more vociferous. Austin charged Hart and takes him down before the bell rings to signal the beginning of the match, and they roll out of the ring. There is an extended sequence of brawling in the crowd, highlighting the aggressive hatred the two adversaries have for each other: this is not a wrestling match, it is a fight.[26] Austin attempts to use the metal ring steps to assault Hart, but, crucially, he is thwarted. (Because Austin's character was being re-positioned as a babyface, it was important that his cheating not be a central feature of the match, so it needed to be in response to Hart's cheating or, as in this

[26] Shamrock was appointed to be the special guest referee for the match, not only because he, as a mixed martial artist, would be comfortable with a submission match environment, but because of his prowess as a fighter himself. The level of animosity (heat) between Hart and Austin, and the "anything goes" nature of this particular match, necessitated a more physically capable referee to keep the two men in line.

instance, it needed to fail.) Hart then takes over (without cheating, because he was still technically the babyface) and begins working Austin's leg, setting up his trademark finishing hold, the Sharpshooter. As Austin writhes wildly in pain, Shamrock asks him if he wants to submit. Austin, displaying his tenacity, responds by giving Shamrock the middle finger with both hands. Hart continues methodically working the leg, taunting Austin as he does so. In a unique spot, Austin catches Hart in the Stone Cold Stunner, his finishing move. Unfortunately, the move is not suited to a submission match, because its effect is that of a quick knockout blow, leaving the opponent unable to verbally submit. Hart quickly regains control working on the leg. He then debuts a new hold, a form of the classic figure-four leg lock in which he wraps Austin's legs around the ring post, a maneuver which combines Hart's long established mastery of classical wrestling with the aggressive and violent nature of this particular conflict. Austin flails wildly, slamming his hand repeatedly on the mat to sell the enhanced pain being caused by the addition of the steel ring post to the long-established torture of the figure-four. Announcer Jim Ross characterizes the hold as inflicting "bone-chilling pain" on Austin ("Bret Hart"). Hart grimaces as he holds on to the hold as tightly as he can. Finally, Austin slips out of the hold.

Hart throws Austin back in the ring and grabs a chair. At first he grabs a heavy, cushioned chair, but he tosses that aside and grabs a lighter, steel chair. This is not only because the lighter chair will be less awkward and hurt less when it is used, but also because the lighter chair will make a much louder sound when used than the heavier chair, whose sound would be muffled by its padding, making its impact less legible to the audience. He takes the chair and folds Austin's foot inside it, and then climbs up to the

second rope to jump off and snap Austin's ankle inside the chair.[27] Austin escapes and knocked Hart off the ropes with a wild swing of the chair. The crowd erupts as Austin limps around the ring, bellowing at Hart. Austin gives Hart another exaggerated blow with the chair before taking over with a succession of standard wrestling moves, including some of Hart's trademark moves, like a stomp to the gut and a Russian leg sweep. Austin attempts a couple of other submissions before finally trying to lock Hart into his own Sharpshooter, but Hart escapes.[28] The fight again spills outside the ring, where Austin is sent careening into the steel railing and begins bleeding from his forehead, initiating the match's most important sequence. Hart viciously attacks the wound with rapid short punches to Austin's head. After ramming Austin's head into the steel steps and ring post, Hart continues the assault on the Austin's head (which is literally dripping blood) inside the ring before once again grabbing the chair and returning to work on Austin's leg. Austin's selling is much less manic now, as he tries to simply crawl away weakly from Hart's punishment. He appears to be losing the ability even to attempt to protect himself and seems almost beaten. Hart finally attempts to apply his finishing hold, but Austin is able to scratch at Hart's eyes and hold him off. Hart pushes Austin into the corner and, with the ropes holding Austin up, begins

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[27] This spot invokes an identical spot used by Austin in an earlier attack on wrestler Brian Pillman. Pillman had been in a real-life motorcycle accident (which was acknowledged on-air) and, while he was recovering, worked as an interviewer and commentator. During an interview with Pillman, Austin (who was acknowledged as Pillman's real-life close friend) attacked Pillman and broke his already injured ankle in a steel chair by folding the chair around it and viciously stomping on it in the same manner Hart would attempt in this match (WWF Superstars 10-27-96). It was an important angle to get Austin over as a heartless and merciless heel (the spot, when used by other wrestlers, is referred to as "Pillmanizing"), and now the maneuver was being turned against him by Hart.

[28] It is important to note that, during the section in which Hart was being punished, the camera not only showed close-ups of Hart's agonized expression, but also a shot of his daughter, in the audience, covering up her face because she could not bear to see her father punished. Jerry Lawler, the heel announcer who had a longstanding grudge against the Hart family, mocked Hart's daughter and father, who was also pictured. Though the crowd was split in their allegiances, during the match itself Hart was not explicitly characterized as the heel. However, his pain was not the story of the match, and was only focused on in this one segment. The larger narrative of the match revolved around Austin's pain.

hammering him with roundhouse punches to his bloody head before Austin desperately kicks him in the groin.

Austin, covered in his own blood, now makes his dramatic comeback. He falls to the mat after fending off Hart's onslaught and attempts to gather himself. He is so battered he cannot stand up, literally using the ropes to pull himself to his feet while Hart sells the effects of the low blow. Austin twists his face into an expression of determination and sends Hart flying across the ring and into the turnbuckle face first, one of Hart's trademark bumps. Austin then picks up the prone Hart and walks him into the corner, where he stomps him repeatedly until Hart is crumpled at his feet. Austin again brandishes his middle fingers and yells at Hart, to a massive crowd pop. Austin slams Hart off the top rope with a superplex, a move which injures Austin as well as Hart. Austin then tries to use an extension cord to choke Hart (the first instance of cheating from Austin that is not a direct response to Hart's cheating), but his heel maneuver backfires when Hart grabs the ring bell, which Hart had placed on the edge of the ring earlier, and hits Austin in the head with it, gaining the advantage once again. Hart recovers and quickly places Austin, who is unable at this point to fight him off, in the Sharpshooter. Austin, caught in the painful hold, screams and twists in pain. Shamrock asks him if he wants to submit, but he declines, blood running down his face, which is contorted in agony. He shakes his head wildly and holds the back of his head. Eventually, the expression on his face goes slack, and he appears to be losing consciousness, as Hart leans into the hold with all his strength. Austin then dramatically slams his hands down on the mat and pushes back against the hold, screaming in pain and

determination, blood cascading down his face and dripping onto the mat.[29] Hart and Austin both struggle, one attempting to keep the other subdued and the other desperately attempting to escape his torture. Austin finally is able to throw Hart off of him, but Hart keeps Austin's legs in his control. Austin vainly thrashes, trying to escape Hart's grasp, but Hart is able to gain firm control over him, sitting back down into the hold once more. Austin weakly tries to repeat his valiant effort, but he is spent. He finally loses consciousness, and after Shamrock ses that he is unable to respond, the match is ended, with Shamrock having to pull Hart off of Austin. Austin is defeated, but he never surrenders.

The action that occurs post-match is essential to complete the story of the contest. Austin remains unconscious, but Hart paces around the ring, seemingly unsatisfied with his victory. After half-heartedly playing to the crowd, he returns to his attack on Austin's leg. Shamrock tries to pull him away, but Hart begins to once again apply the Sharpshooter to his vanquished and helpless foe, forcing the more than capable Shamrock to throw Hart to the mat. Hart scrambles to his feet and the two men tease a face-off. However, Hart, to the great disapproval of the crowd, walks away from the game Shamrock. As he exits the ring area he slaps the hand of a couple fans, but is clearly antagonistic to others. Austin, beaten and bloody, is left in the ring. He again uses the ropes to pull himself to his feet, and rewards the referee who tries to assist him with a Stunner.[30] Visibly injured from the battle, he collapses when he tries to walk and practically falls out of the ring. He uses the ring itself for support and limps into the

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[29] The image from this match of Austin's blood-stained, defiant face attempting to fight off the hold became iconic, reappearing frequently in video montages and even being used on a t-shirt bearing the tagline, "Blood from a Stone."

[30] It was a regular referee that Austin attacked, not Ken Shamrock, who disappeared after his altercation with Hart so that the focus of the scene could shift entirely to Austin.

darkness of the backstage area. The announcers spend several minutes focusing on the fact that Austin never surrendered to Hart, and that he walked from the ring without help.

Though the fans had been increasingly supportive of Austin in the previous months, and had slowly been turning against Hart, this match performed the function of definitively switching their respective roles: Austin was now the babyface in the feud and Hart was now the heel, and this transformation was made concrete by the skillful and deliberate deployment of physical pain. Despite the fact that the audience was becoming more and more vocal in its support of Austin, his transformation to full-fledged good guy could not be completed without the story of this match, which focused on his pain and suffering. His essential character remained unchanged: he was still violent and belligerent (he attacked the referee who was trying to help him), but now those qualities receded into the background. His determination, resolve, and tenacity became his defining characteristics, a reimagining of his character made possible by way of physical pain. The essential image of the match, and, indeed, of the "Stone Cold" Steve Austin character itself, became the picture of his face covered in blood, screaming in pain and resolve as he fought against the torture being inflicted upon him by his opponent.

While Bret Hart was not, during the match itself, the heel, and did suffer his share of violence during its course, the clear main narrative of the match revolved around the pain of Steve Austin, and Austin's reaction to it. The extra emphasis given to his entrance, with the shattering glass, indicated that Austin was man to pay attention to in the fight. The announcers made repeated references to his toughness, while frequently questioning the resolve of Hart's character by suggesting that he had changed, and wondering what his excuse would be if he lost ("Bret Hart"). By contrast, one announcer

observed, during a period where Hart was punishing Austin mercilessly, that if Shamrock attempted to stop the match to save Austin from being seriously injured without a clear submission from Austin, "'Stone Cold' Steve Austin will attempt to kill him" ("Bret Hart").[31] And while Hart did suffer during the body of the match, his suffering was not as acute as Austin's, which more closely resembles a man being tortured. Austin's offense was scattershot, and the submission moves he applied had no logic behind them, besides the fact that it was a submission match. His most notable moments in the match were his comebacks, which were powerful because of the suffering he had been forced to endure. Hart's offense, on the other hand, was deliberate and sustained (as opposed to Austin's energetic and emotional outbursts of offense which were almost always responses to the attacks of his opponent). Hart returned repeatedly to his attack on the leg of his opponent, engaging in a "methodical physical dissection of the lower anatomy" of Austin ("Bret Hart"). He used a variety of moves and holds to punish Austin's leg, including the ringpost-assisted figure-four leg lock. He was in control for much of the match, filling the role of the heel in this respect, though he was not, technically, the heel during the match itself. The pain endured by Austin in the match obscured the negative history of his character. It erased from the minds of the audience all that was problematic about Austin's persona, recreating the character in a new context that began and ended with the noble way in which he attempted to struggle through overwhelming physical

[31] Because of the fluid nature of the characters of both wrestlers in the match, all three announcers clearly supported Austin, even though he was technically the heel. Jerry Lawler, the heel announcer, openly supported Austin because of Austin's lingering heel status and his own previously mentioned longstanding animosity towards Hart and most of the Hart family. Vince McMahon did not take a clear side, but leaned toward Austin (who would eventually become his hated rival) because of Hart's "whining" and his assault on McMahon prior to the match. Jim Ross was the most even-handed in his calling of the match, questioning McMahon's condemnations of Hart and appreciating the skills of both men, though he still inordinately focused on the suffering and toughness of Austin, who was still technically a heel for most of the match.

pain. The effect was so strong that even after he attacked a helpless official who was attempting to assist him, that act of violence was effectively cast in a positive light and characterized as indicative of his rugged individualism, an attribute that was focused on obsessively by the announcers as he exited.[32] He was referred to as "a man's man," and "so gutsy…so obstinate, so stubborn, so proud that he would not submit" ("Bret Hart"). There was a final shot of the blood-stained canvas, and McMahon stated that the defeated Austin would "take his pride with him back to the locker room," while, Lawler argued that, "Bret Hart [cannot] be proud that he won, because Steve Austin did not submit" ("Bret Hart"). The intensity of the pain suffered by Austin actually transformed him into the winner, and Hart into the loser.

Bret Hart's transformation to heel, on the other hand, occured after the match itself had ended. During the course of the match itself, contrary to the insistence of the announcers, Hart did not behave in an overtly heelish fashion. He broke rules, but so did Austin, and the match was, by definition, lawless. Also, the level of aggression and violence was appropriate given the intensity of the conflict between the two men. Additionally, Hart's suffering was not ignored during the match. His face, contorted in pain, was shown in close-up. Though the announcers at times seemed determined to paint the crowd as firmly pro-Austin, it was clear that the crowd was split. And while Austin's followers may have outnumbered Hart's, Hart still had a sizable and devoted following. Hart did not become a full-on heel until after the match was finished. Austin, valiant in defeat, was unconscious and completely helpless, and Hart began to attack him again. He resumed his torture of Austin, returning to an (at that point indisputably

[32] Austin, during the rest of his wildly successful career, would physically assault scores of non-wrestling characters who were unable to defend themselves (including women), but they were almost always identified as representative of a larger network of authority figures that was attempting to emasculate him.

inappropriate) attack on Austin's leg. Further, when he was confronted by Shamrock, who, unlike the defeated Austin, was able to adequately defend himself, he retreated rather than engage in a fair fight with an able opponent. His obsession with inflicting pain on Austin effectively turned him heel, and that pain erased everything else about Hart's character, which remained unchanged.[33] He was now the bad guy because he was torturing the good guy. All context for the conflict (which consisted largely of unprovoked aggression from Austin) was forgotten, and Austin's physical pain created a new reality in which the two men's roles were reversed: Austin was now the persecuted babyface, comfortably aligned with dominant values because of his dogged determination to overcome the odds, while Hart, instead of being a good man pushed too far by an almost sociopathic antagonist, was the sadistic heel, taking unfair advantage of a prostrate Austin. The characters of the two men actually barely changed, but the context for their conflict was reinvented completely, shot through the prism of Austin's intense physical pain.

Hart's signature finishing hold, the Sharpshooter, was a crucial tool in the story of the match, becoming a version of Scarry's description of the weapon the torture victim is forced to look at and think about before it is used. The hold had been long-established as one of the most fearsome in the WWF, a fact which the announcers repeatedly acknowledge during the match: "Bret Hart has beaten every superstar with this move!"

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[33] Hart's heel persona was unique, in that he was a heel only to American audiences. He made it clear that he felt that American wrestling fans had turned their backs on him by embracing "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, and that he would now turn his back on them. His contention was that the American wrestling fans had changed, not him, and that he espoused the same values he had as a babyface, only now he was greeted with a negative reaction. He surrounded himself with a group consisting mostly of his family and became openly antagonistic to the United States and American wrestling fans. Hart actually became a hated heel in America, but remained a beloved babyface in the rest of the world, especially in his native Canada, where he was something of a national hero. He engaged freely in heel behavior, but justified it by explaining that his actions were actually reactions precipitated by the hypocrisy of the America and American wrestling fans, literally aligning himself against the dominant culture of the United States ("Hitman Hart").

("Bret Hart"). When Austin teased applying the hold to Hart, they even wondered aloud about the possibility of Hart submitting to his own hold ("Bret Hart"). Both men struggled wildly and desperately when it appeared their opponent was attempting to trap them in the hold. The Sharpshooter was dangled in front of the audience, creating the impression that when the hold was finally applied all hope would be lost for the man unlucky enough to be caught in its grasp. The informed and invested fan would have been aware, however, that the Sharpshooter was Hart's specialty, *his* hold, and they would know that his single-minded focus on Austin's leg was a prelude to that hold (and, for those who were not aware, the announcers made sure to emphasize that point so that there could be no confusion about what was taking place). Establishing context for the weapon itself was crucial for its psychological effectiveness. The audience was then, finally, forced to watch helplessly as Austin was placed in the hold, and then watch impotently as he vainly struggled against it, with a bit of false hope when it momentarily appeared that he may break free.

Hart vs. McMahon

While the Hart-Austin match used pain to create a memorable and supremely effective spectacle (the match catapulted Austin to superstardom and launched a very successful stint as a heel for Hart), another match involving Bret Hart provides an example of the ways in which pain, deployed ineffectively, can destroy a narrative that would otherwise seem impossible to spoil. Thirteen years after his match with Austin at Wrestlemania 13, Hart wrestled Vince McMahon himself on March 28, 2010, in Glendale, Arizona, at Wrestlemania 26 in a match that had long been fantasized about by professional wrestling fans. Eight months after his triumph at Wrestlemania 13, Hart had

been preparing to leave the WWF for its main competitor at the time, World Championship Wrestling (WCW). His final match was to be defending his WWF Championship at the Survivor Series pay-per-view in Montreal against his hated rival (in storyline and in reality), Shawn Michaels. Hart, fiercely protective of his "Hitman" character, had declined to be beaten for the title in his home country, not wanting to disappoint his most fervent and dedicated fans. McMahon agreed to let Hart leave the show without being defeated, but orchestrated a double-cross in which Hart would allow himself to be placed in the Sharpshooter and the referee would then stop the match, claiming Hart had submitted to his own hold, which in fact he had not.[34] This action was roundly condemned by other wrestlers and the majority of professional wrestling fans, and, more than anything else, this "real life" action was the catalyst for the evil Mr. McMahon character. The possibility of a feud between the two men based on their well-known (even to casual fans) real-life animosity had long been discussed, but seemed to be an impossibility because of Hart's physical condition (his career had been ended by the accumulated effects of multiple concussions, followed by a severe stroke) and his unwillingness to ever work with McMahon in light of their history. Finally, he agreed, and it appeared that one of the most famous incidents in wrestling history would receive satisfactory closure.

The build-up to the match was uneven, but nonetheless the match itself, even with Hart's physical limitations, seemed certain to provide satisfaction: Hart, the returning

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[34] The "Montreal Screwjob," as the match is referred to, and the circumstances surrounding it (including Hart's behind-the-scenes conflicts with Michaels), are far too involved and complicated to delve into in this essay, but more has been written about this single match than probably any other in modern professional wrestling history. The documentary *Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows* details the events leading up to the match and the match itself, while wrestling journalist Dave Meltzer has written extensively about the story in his newsletter, the *Wrestling Observer*, most notably in the immediate aftermath of the match (Meltzer 11-17-97; 12-21-98).

legend, would finally gain revenge against the nefarious Mr. McMahon, the man who had robbed him of his legacy. Despite Hart's physical condition and the fact that McMahon was a sixty-four year-old non-wrestler, it seemed impossible for the match to disappoint: it did not need to be a classic, like Hart vs. Austin, because McMahon simply needed to receive his comeuppance.

Directly before the match begins, McMahon informs Hart that he has paid off members of Hart's family to assist him in the no-holds-barred match, seemingly insuring himself victory.[35] Hart responds that his family had told him about McMahon's machinations, and that they had all agreed to take McMahon's money and double-cross McMahon himself, putting McMahon in a position in which he would not only have to face Hart, but the ring would be surrounded by the Hart family, with one of the Hart brothers acting as referee. This put McMahon, the heel, in a seemingly no-win situation from the start of the match.

A close reading of this match shows how physical pain can, when employed ineffectively, even sabotage narrative desires, forcing an audience to confront aspects of a narrative that they would rather ignore. During the match itself, McMahon gets literally no offense in on Hart, deflating the crowd and undermining the story of the match. Hart slowly demolishes McMahon, with the assistance of his family. In a particularly nasty spot, McMahon is knocked down by a double-team attack outside the ring from Hart's nephew and his tag team partner (a close Hart family friend), his head bouncing sickeningly off the protective mats surrounding the ring. At one point it appears McMahon may have gained an advantage by crawling under the ring and retrieving a

[35] The Hart family, one of the most famous families in professional wrestling, is well known for not only its success in the professional wrestling business, but also for its almost soap opera-like drama and personal disputes.

crowbar to use as a weapon, but Hart simply knocks it out of his hand and continues the assault, later using it himself to further brutalize McMahon. Hart uses some of his old trademark moves to punish McMahon, and even teases the Sharpshooter to the delight of the crowd, but instead continues the beating. Eventually the crowd's enthusiasm begins to flag. When Hart brings a chair into the ring and begins, in a scene similar to his assault on Austin thirteen years ago, a seemingly endless attack of more than a dozen shots on McMahon with it, the crowd goes relatively silent. (Before the beating begins, however, he actually sits in the chair and catches his breath, allowing the audience to focus on McMahon writhing in pain.) Jerry Lawler, in a subdued tone, notes that McMahon's punishment is becoming difficult to watch (Wrestlemania 26). Finally, mercifully, Hart applies the Sharpshooter, McMahon immediately submits, and the match ends. The Hart family fills the ring and celebrates what is meant to be Bret "Hitman" Hart's greatest triumph, but the scene is oddly hollow.

The match, described by Meltzer as "the most psychologically confusing big match in recent history," was a failure because of the fact that it consisted exclusively of McMahon, the "ultimate heel," being slowly and brutally tortured by the babyface Hart (Meltzer 4-10-10). While the point of the match was Hart finally getting his revenge on McMahon, the way in which the match played out negated the desired cathartic effect. The match was built around McMahon's pain, not Hart's. The overwhelming physical pain inflicted on McMahon obliterated the context for the thrashing he was being given, and the crowd, which had previously been excited to see the hated Mr. McMahon punished, was unable to ignore the "incontestable reality" being displayed: McMahon was the victim, Hart the victimizer. In Reik's terms, attention was forced on the corner

of the room everyone would have preferred to ignore. Despite McMahon's overwrought, somewhat comical selling, eventually even the announcers, who attempted to highlight Hart's pain by repeating over and over the context for the spectacle by making multiple references to the emotional pain and frustration McMahon had caused Hart, fell relatively silent along with the crowd in light of McMahon's persecution. There was nothing to be said. Hart's emotional pain had become invisible, and McMahon's physical pain was telling the viewer all that they needed to know. Unfortunately, the reality being thrust in the audience's face was one that contradicted the narrative the audience knew to be "correct" (the wronged legendary hero getting his revenge on the power-mad billionaire), making the match into a "confusing" demonstration of the powerful and sadistic Hart violently subjugating the weak McMahon, a reality which was not satisfying at all. The match completely defied all traditional notions of professional wrestling psychology (and, really, storytelling in general). Meltzer, even taking into account the limitations of both men, argued that "you are…talking about two men who are absolute masters of the art of psychology…That's what made [the match] so perplexing" (4-10-10). The audience, wholly invested in Hart, was forced to confront the fact that the character they enthusiastically identified with was behaving in an extremely problematic fashion: viciously and sadistically torturing an outnumbered and overmatched adversary who was unable to defend himself. McMahon's shocking and vivid physical suffering, his "methodical physical dissection," subverted the explicitly stated storyline of the match, ruining any effect the resolution of the feud – a blow-off literally more than a decade in the making – could have had and sabotaging a storyline that had been presumed to be a sure-fire success.

Conclusion

In professional wrestling, more than in any other form of entertainment, physical pain is the story. The skillful use of suffering forges an intense connection between the performer and the audience by using physical pain, which also makes it possible to reorder the world so that the potentially unattractive and unpleasant features of the sufferer (and of the culture itself) can be ignored or even transferred to other groups with less cultural agency. The narrative of a traditional professional wrestling match transforms the strong into the weak, and often vice versa, so that dominant ideology can make itself into a virtuous victim free from all the problematic aspects of self that it is unable to provide satisfactory answers for in "real life." Professional wrestling's main pleasure, then, is perhaps masochistic, in that it allows, by way of identification with the carefully controlled physical suffering of others, a refuge from the unpleasant drawbacks of identification with dominant ideology.

However, this reading does not tell the entire story of professional wrestling, because this type of narrative is not the only narrative played out in professional wrestling matches. This masochistic escape is prevalent, particularly in "main event" matches, but other types of stories are told in matches that appear lower on the card. Matches such as "spotfests" or "sprints," for example, focus relatively little on the physical punishment of the participants, instead serving more as a showcase of spectacular moves performed in rapid succession. It is telling, however, that most wrestling fans, even if they appreciate these types of matches, do not consider them as emotionally satisfying as the traditional form outlined in this essay.

What is potentially more intriguing, and consequently more worthy of investigation, is the fact that the good guy does not always win, especially on the undercard. While the main event can typically be expected to reinforce dominant ideology by having the babyface prevail at the end of a feud, very often on the undercard, heels are allowed to triumph over lesser babyfaces, and, by extension, the dominant ideology they stand in for. However, this is not a hard and fast rule, and there are exceptions.[36] Particularly in the undercard, where the stakes are not as high, heels, and their challenges to the dominant culture, are allowed to successfully challenge the mainstream.

Additionally, it is very much worth noting that these challenges, however distorted they are, are at least allowed to confront dominant ideology. Despite the fact that these challenges are often mangled, dominant ideology's imaginings of marginalized communities (for example, Goldust's "sexually predatory homosexual"), they nevertheless admit the presence of an alternative to the mainstream, and consequently a potential threat. For dominant culture to play the victim, there must be someone to play the victimizer. By admitting that there are challenges to dominant culture, and by allowing them to act effectively against that culture, a tacit admission is made that the dominant values can be challenged, that they do not inherently prevail. Though professional wrestling largely works to make it easier for the viewer to close his or her

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[36] It is interesting to note that not all wrestling promotions book their feuds in the same way. WWF/E is famous for traditionally having a babyface champion, with various heels brought in to challenge him. (In fact, WWF's perennial superman babyface champion was likely an important component in its rise to dominance in the professional wrestling business (Meltzer 4-21-03; 4).) While WWE has no current viable competitor, past competitors did not necessarily subscribe to this philosophy. WCW, for example, typically had a heel world champion, with various babyface challengers. The most unfortunate consequence of the rise of the WWE as the dominant promotion in professional wrestling in the United States is the extinction of the smaller territorial promotions that used to populate the professional wrestling landscape, all of which had their own unique style of storytelling and wrestling.

eyes to the more troubling aspects of the mainstream culture, those elements and, more crucially, the challenges that the heels often embody, remain. Their suffering, and, by extension, their validity, may be minimized, but the threat to dominant ideology embodied by the heels cannot be entirely erased.

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Curriculum Vitae

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Lead training for new Writers' Room Tutors

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Articles Under Consideration for Publication:

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